

From Mijikenda City to Busaidi Backwater

The Mijikenda delegation to Muscat in 1729 was not the first inland cohort to visit the Omani port city, according to a Swahili chronicle written in the nineteenth century. This chronicle tells of a trip by representatives from Chonyi, Jibana, and Ribe more than three decades prior. They traveled to southern Arabia as part of an alliance with Mtwapa and Kilifi—smaller towns immediately north of Mombasa—to visit the imam shortly prior to Oman’s siege of Mombasa, which began in 1696. According to the chronicle, when the representatives arrived in Muscat, they each received a gift—a pipe for the Chonyi, a ring for the Jibana, and a chair for the Ribe. The gifts established a *khatti*, or contract agreement, between the imam and his visitors.¹ Shortly thereafter, Oman sent ships to Mombasa to confront the Portuguese. The episode may or may not have happened (and the fact that Chonyi allied against Oman in the subsequent siege raises some questions about its veracity). Nevertheless, the chronicle provides a productive entry point for this chapter because of the specific language it used to describe the imam’s gifts for his Mijikenda visitors. According to the Swahili text, by offering the gifts “*Imamu akawaheshimu sana*,” or “the imam honored them exceedingly.”² The chronicle designated these honors using the Swahili term *-heshimu*, meaning “to honor,” a word that signified cloth tribute payments that flowed from Mombasa to its interior.

This chapter focuses on the changing political relationships between Mombasa and its interior during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Portuguese observers described Mombasa, they referred to it as a city situated in the “land of” the Musungulos or a “region called Musungula.” Intentionally or not, by positioning Mombasa in the context of its mainland, Portuguese imperialists recognized the ways that Mombasa relied on—and, in many cases, was forced to show deference to—its mainland. This chapter expands on Mijikenda speakers’ role in

Mombasa's politics, following two key threads. First, I show how Mijikenda speakers understood their relationship with Mombasa by studying the rituals of honor (*heshima*) that undergirded their partnerships with different maritime actors. Second, I explore the ways that this port-interior relationship changed during the nineteenth century, after Mombasa became part of the growing Indian Ocean empire of Oman's Busaidi dynasty.

I trace this history through records of *heshima* tributes and an interlinked practice called *kore*, an ancient Bantu word that referred to a person exchanged as compensation to settle a debt. For centuries, Mijikenda speakers established favorable terms with coastal traders by claiming *heshima*, often made manifest through tributes in cotton textiles. Merchants in Mombasa occasionally seized *kore* from Mijikenda communities to ensure that exchanges with their inland partners remained balanced and fair. Together, *heshima* and *kore* helped mutually constitute trading practices, partnerships, and political affiliations in the region. Mijikenda communities remained fully independent from Mombasa so long as they continued to receive *heshima* from their urban partners, whether those were Swahili speakers, Omani Arabs, or Europeans. In 1837, however, Mombasa became formally part of the Busaidi Sultanate, a change that altered long-standing practices of *heshima* and *kore*.

As scholars have well documented, the Busaidi era was a period of intensive global integration during which East Africa's interior became more directly connected to the Indian Ocean economy. Long-distance caravans flocked from far and wide into East Africa's interior, reaching the Congo Basin by the second half of the 1800s. Consumer demands for piano keys and billiard balls in industrializing countries in Europe and North America fueled East Africa's ivory trade. East African gum copal proved to be the ideal resin for varnishing wooden furniture in factories as far afield as Salem, Massachusetts, as chapter 3 noted. On the Zanzibar Archipelago and East Africa's mainland, the Busaidi established plantations where enslaved laborers grew cloves and other globally exported cash crops. These new trading connections granted communities in East Africa's interior even greater access to imported goods such as beads, wire, textiles, and guns, ushering manifold social and cultural transformations among different inland societies.³

For many living in Mijikenda-speaking villages, this moment of growing global connections was characterized foremost by the Busaidi's movement away from established norms of *heshima* and *kore*. As the previous chapter delineated, Mijikenda speakers had long played a leading role in shaping Mombasa's maritime politics. Inland representatives traveled to Muscat for diplomatic missions while the Portuguese described Mombasa as a port city in the land of the Mijikenda. Inland communities' participation in East Africa's oceanic connections began to change under the Busaidi, however. Slavery became more central to the region's economy, and transformations in trading practices—from its financing, to the merchants participating in trade, to the trade routes themselves—undermined Mijikenda

speakers' position as a gateway society mediating the flow of goods between coast and interior. In chronicling these changes, this chapter offers an inland view of a transformative period in East Africa's history, seen through the lens of Mijikenda speakers' most important strategies for participating in oceanic trade and politics.

MOMBASA, THE MAZRUI, AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN-TO-RURAL TRIBUTE

As we saw in the previous chapter, urban-to-rural textile tributes were a key feature of politics in Mombasa. From the viewpoint of foreigners like the Portuguese, tributes were simply transactional matters that enabled them to purchase the loyalties of leaders of inland constituencies. For instance, when the Portuguese regained control of Fort Jesus in 1728, the general overseeing the imperial venture violated "long-standing custom" by failing to send any textiles to the mainland. Communities on the mainland were "reluctant to come and swear obedience" to Fort Jesus as a result. The general quickly reversed course, realizing that peace on the island and access to trade goods were contingent on these gifts. Shortly after sending textiles to the mainland as tribute, three Musungulo leaders arrived in Mombasa promising their "obedience."⁴ But as much as the Portuguese needed to obtain their inland partners' cooperation, these alliances would go on only so long as they continued to supply the mainland with cloth.

The directional flow of such tributes, from the urban port to its interior, contrasts with a characteristic rural dependency. In Mombasa's case, global empires and maritime merchants were deferential to smaller, inland-oriented communities. Furthermore, the tributes themselves demonstrated Mijikenda speakers' relative autonomy from their partners in the port city. Although they built allegiances with Mombasa's controlling authorities, different Mijikenda-speaking groups also readily shifted their affiliations at their own will. In this way, they showed that they were never fully beholden to the Portuguese, Omanis, or any other maritime powers with whom they affiliated. To further explore the nature of these relationships, let's turn to the mainland's role in Mombasa's politics.

Although they maintained a degree of independence from Mombasa, Mijikenda speakers still played an important role in the town's politics, beyond their functions as military allies and trading partners. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Portuguese records from as early as 1610 reported that each time prominent "Musungulos" visited Mombasa, the town's leader was obligated to provide them with food and cloth.⁵ These obligations applied in other coastal towns within Mombasa's larger orbit. Vumba Kuu, a small Swahili-speaking town located around the modern border of Kenya and Tanzania, offers a useful illustration. Vumba's oral traditions recount that whenever a new sultan was enthroned, the town would invite representatives from Mombasa, along with neighboring Digo and Segeju communities, for feasts and entertainment. The attending Digo and

Segeju elders were given huge quantities of cloth, amounting to “two thousand ells”—approximately three thousand feet—in return for their participation.⁶ Even as control over the coast shifted from Portuguese to Omani authorities, these expectations continued. Whenever inland leaders came to Mombasa for “public business,” the town’s Omani governors were beholden to host and entertain them with feasts, dances, and gifts.⁷ In some Mijikenda settlements, a special liaison called *mwana njira* (“child of the path”) acted as an agent or go-between with Mombasa’s government.⁸

A brief overview of Mombasa under the Mazrui dynasty of Oman (ca. 1730s–1837) helps to situate the enduring significance of town-interior affiliation strategies. After Oman retook control of Mombasa at the end of 1729, the imam appointed a governor (*liwali* in Swahili) to oversee the city. Rivalries between local constituencies undermined the authority of the first few governors, ultimately leading to the appointment of Muhammad bin Uthman al-Mazrui, who became *liwali* sometime after 1735.⁹ For the next century, he and his descendants oversaw the city. The Mazrui initially sent annual tributes back to Muscat, but as Saif bin Sultan II’s power waned, they became more and more independent. By the 1740s, the Busaidi dynasty assumed control of the Imamate from the traditional ruling dynasty, the Yarubi. However, the Mazrui refused to recognize Busaidi authority. This meant Mombasa quickly found itself a port city under the governorship of an Omani dynasty but without any formal political ties to Oman.¹⁰ The decoupling of the Mazrui from Oman’s political leadership made them heavily reliant on different constituencies in Mombasa. Rather than representing foreign overlords, they had to enculturate themselves into Mombasa’s social fabric. The Mazrui learned to speak Swahili, married into local families, and adopted the locally practiced branch of Sunni Islam.¹¹ They also invested heavily in relationships with Mombasa’s political elites, especially the members of the two loosely organized political confederations known collectively as the Twelve Tribes (*Thenashara Taifa* in Swahili).

The Twelve Tribes consisted of two rival political factions, the *Thelatha Taifa* (Three Tribes) and *Tisa Taifa* (Nine Tribes), each of which represented different locations around Mombasa. F. J. Berg has proposed that these confederations formed amid disruptions on the East African coast during the sixteenth century, as newcomers incorporated themselves into Mombasa’s social fabric following migrations from northern Swahili towns. After 1593, Estado da Índia delegated the administration of Mombasa to the town’s rivals from Malindi. In this context, the confederations provided Mombasa’s elites with a degree of local political autonomy under foreign rule.¹²

One of the Twelve Tribes’ key advantages was that they had established partnerships with neighboring inland communities. According to historical traditions, each group within the *Thelatha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa* had formalized tributary relationships with specific Mijikenda subgroups that were made meaningful through practices like gift exchanges.¹³ These partnerships sustained Mombasa’s population

amid the political shifts, conflicts, and warfare that affected the town into the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Alliances between Mijikenda groups and various constituencies in Mombasa meant not only military support but also access to foods, trade commodities, and, in some cases, safe refuge.¹⁵ For instance, recall from the previous chapter that during Oman's siege of Mombasa, Portuguese officers who sheltered in Fort Jesus relied on Mwinyi Chambe (a member of the *Thelatha Taifa*) to broker their arrangement to receive provisions from Chonyi. As was the case in this episode, inland communities expected to receive tributes from their partners in Mombasa in return for continued support, including from Mazrui governors by the eighteenth century. These relationships were unquestionably transactional, and members of Mijikenda communities had a considerable say in the terms of the contract.

People living in Mijikenda villages were not just Mombasa's trading partners and military allies. Through political affiliations and tributes, they helped establish the legitimacy of governing authorities in Mombasa and other coastal towns. They maintained these relationships at their own will. The next section considers how Mijikenda speakers understood their relationship with Mombasa's elites and various foreign interlocutors, focusing on the rituals of honor called *heshima* that went along with the cloth tributes.

DEMANDING HONOR: INLAND UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRIBUTES AS AUTONOMY

While the earliest records of Mijikenda speakers' interactions with Mombasa give only a vague sense of the meanings that they assigned to these urban-to-rural tributes, documentary records from the mid-nineteenth century offer a more fine-grained view of these exchanges. When read with the longer role of textiles in Mombasa's politics in mind, the records illuminate how tributes constituted Mijikenda speakers' autonomy from the port city. The most detailed accounts of these practices appear in the writings of Johann Ludwig Krapf, a German missionary who spent close to a decade living in the Mombasa region while proselytizing for the Church Missionary Society of England. When Krapf arrived in Mombasa in 1844, he learned of a practice that he would need to adhere to while traveling on the mainland, called *heshima* in Swahili and *eshima* or *ishima* in Mijikenda languages. From conversations in Mombasa, Krapf learned that this practice referred to displays of honor "connected with the exchange of presents," which acted as "marks of good recognition" when traveling on the mainland.¹⁶ Krapf soon witnessed the practice of *heshima* firsthand when he visited Mombasa's mainland.

After traveling up Tudor Creek by boat, Krapf and his party reached Rabai, one of the nearest Mijikenda-speaking settlements to Mombasa. From there, they traversed forested footpaths, eventually reaching the outermost gate of the settlement of Ribe, where they were instructed to wait for a welcome party. Before long,

a band of men emerged from the forest and “displayed their *heshima*,” a performance consisting of “shouting, dancing, brandishing their swords and bows.” They then led the missionary into the village to the backdrop of shrieks and war yelps until the entire village congregated around him. After this performance, Krapf was taken into the house of a village leader. Assuming the missionary was a merchant, he was expected to offer his own *heshima* in the form of gifts.¹⁷ For coastal merchants, the number of gifts expected as *heshima* varied according to the value of the goods they carried as trade articles. Once the merchants had offered appropriate tribute, they were allowed safe passage through the area, accompanied by a local guide or escort.¹⁸ These rituals were a necessary component of trade practices inland from the coast, which “all the great merchants” adhered to regardless of their status in Mombasa.¹⁹ According to Krapf, if merchants did not participate in the ritual or refused to offer the proper amount of tribute to their inland partners, they were “liable to be robbed.”²⁰

A brief detour into the meaning of the word *heshima* in Swahili and Mijikenda offers some insights into the different ways that people in coastal East Africa understood these rituals. *Heshima* is an Arabic loanword in Swahili that originally meant “diffidence, timidity, or shame” in Arabic.²¹ Coastal East Africans altered the original meaning of the root, reinterpreting the word as both a noun and verb that meant “honor” and “to honor.” *Heshima*, according to Krapf’s Swahili dictionary, was “rendered by giving a present of respect.” This was expressed very directly in the word’s verbal form, *-heshimu*, which meant “to respect” or to honor a person “by giving him a present.”²² Most scholarship on *heshima* on the Swahili coast has emphasized how this form of honor operated alongside concepts of social rank and etiquette.²³ In Swahili towns during the nineteenth century, the term *heshima* articulated the “power and fear associated with holding honor,” made meaningful through the power that coastal patricians held over slaves and other dependents.²⁴ A person demonstrated that they possessed honor by acting with behaviors and virtues appropriate to their station in life. In the case of an enslaved person, *heshima* meant showing proper deference and respect to coastal elites. Wealthy coastal patricians, meanwhile, established their honor through proper patronage.²⁵

The conceptual links between honor, diffidence, and timidity make sense when viewing *heshima* as a facet of public reputation that was actualized in the relationship between Swahili elites and their dependents. However, taking the term out of a strictly Swahili context puts the relationship between honor and diffidence in an entirely different light. By offering *heshima* in the form of gifts and tributes, traders and travelers in Mombasa’s interior honored inland leaders and made known their deference to local authorities. The *heshima* that coastal traders received in return—which consisted of dance performances and shouting—was, by contrast, embedded with gestures to the martial capacities of their hosts.²⁶ Visiting merchants assumed positions of diffidence or timidity in these rituals, even as the performances of *heshima* occurred under the auspices of mutual respect. Echoing

Portuguese portrayals of Mombasa as a port city in the land of the Mijikenda, the *heshima* rituals affirmed inland authority in the region, with textiles being their key signature.

Heshima is probably an old loanword in both Swahili and Mijikenda. While most Arabic loaning in Swahili occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the phonological shape of *heshima* in Mijikenda dialects indicates that it may date to an earlier period of loaning.²⁷ The sound “h” was not part of the phonemic inventory in proto-Mijikenda, but it occurs in modern dialects as a reflex of the proto-Sabaki phonemes *t and *p. Their pronunciation of the loanword (*eshima* or *ishima*) suggests that speakers borrowed the word before these sound changes to create the modern sound “h” occurred in Mijikenda languages.²⁸ Rather than adapting a foreign sound (in Arabic هـ or ح), early speakers of Mijikenda dropped it entirely from the loanword. The same linguistic code affects one additional Swahili-Arabic loanword in Mijikenda: *hasa:ba* (Swahili *-hesabu*), meaning “to count,” which speakers of Mijikenda dialects attest as *-esabu* or *-isabu*. The possibility that these two terms date to the same period of loaning seems to indicate that the custom of offering inland communities “honor” developed alongside trading practices.²⁹

While the evidence does not allow us to determine whether the cloth payments from the Portuguese era were also called *heshima*, earlier records do clearly demonstrate that similar transfers of gifts and tributes from Mombasa to the mainland predate Krapf’s writings by at least several centuries. These shows of hospitality were reciprocal but also contractual. To establish a partnership in the mid-nineteenth century, representatives from the Twelve Tribes paid a set fee of six hundred dollars, which was divided among local homestead heads. For this fee, traders from Mombasa were given food and some commercial benefits when traveling inland from the city with the expectation that they would provide gifts in cloth on each visit. In turn, Swahili merchants gave their inland partners food, lodging, and protection when visiting Mombasa.³⁰ These town-mainland alliances are sometimes portrayed as patron-client relationships in which the Mombasa groups are the senior partners.³¹ But if we consider these relationships in light of *heshima* rituals it becomes possible to imagine how Mijikenda speakers understood these arrangements not simply as a way to command honor and conduct trade, but as a strategy for asserting their autonomy from the town.

Krapf’s commentaries make clear that Mijikenda-speaking communities dictated the terms of these arrangements. Everyone in Mombasa, “even the governor,” according to Krapf, had to “submit to this custom” of giving *heshima* to communities on the mainland. To Krapf this indicated that Mijikenda communities “consider[ed] themselves entirely independent” from coastal authorities who were obligated to “pay them tribute if not in name.”³² *Heshima* ensured that Mijikenda speakers would be treated with respect when visiting Mombasa. Furthermore,

the rituals enabled inland communities to tightly control the flow of goods and people between Mombasa and the interior (and vice versa).³³ Even as Mijikenda communities partnered with some of the most formidable political entities in the Indian Ocean, they never considered themselves to be dependent on or beholden to the authority of any person, city, or larger polity. By demanding that Mombasa's merchants and leaders showed them deference and provided them with regular tributes, they continually affirmed their autonomy from the town's governing authorities. Rural dependencies they were not.

THE RISE OF THE BUSAIDI AND THE SHIFTING TIDES OF WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN POLITICS

Whenever foreign powers arrived in Mombasa, they adopted existing practices of urban-to-rural tribute to cement their relationships with the mainland. In 1824, for instance, the British briefly established a protectorate at Mombasa at the Mazrui's urging. Just a year later, Mombasa installed a new *liwali* (governor), and the Mazrui used this opportunity to ensure that the British would be responsible for paying tributes to the mainland. They invited representatives from more than twenty inland settlements to Mombasa, informing them that "the island and country of Mombasa belongs to the king of England and it was now governed by the English governor."³⁴ The Mazrui governor instructed James Emery—the British lieutenant overseeing Mombasa—to pay each of the inland representatives in textiles, signifying to all in attendance that the British were now responsible for maintaining these tribute relationships.³⁵ Like the Portuguese and Omanis before him, Emery was enculturated into established tribute practices, providing the Mijikenda representatives with cloth tributes to demonstrate the British navy's desire to affiliate with communities on the mainland.

The British navy reached Mombasa against the backdrop of major political changes in East Africa and the western Indian Ocean. When the Busaidi took over Oman in the 1740s, their navy was decimated. As a result, the Mazrui maintained control over Mombasa without any challenges from Muscat. But over the course of the 1760s and 1770s, Muscat became one of the most important commercial ports in the western Indian Ocean, operating at the center of a nexus connecting Persia, India, and the Red Sea.³⁶ The Busaidi also maintained spheres of influence on Kilwa and Zanzibar, the latter town increasingly becoming a focal point of their nascent empire. However, Mombasa remained out of their reach.

The Omanis considered Mombasa key to controlling commerce in East Africa, but Mijikenda communities stood in the way of these aims. According to the Busaidi dynasty's own chronicles, Hamad bin Said (the leader of Oman from 1784–1792) aspired to gain control of two port cities in his lifetime: Mombasa and Bombay. Mindful of Oman's long history with Mombasa, he reportedly told an

aide that gaining control of the town would be a major challenge because its “fort is strong, and it is held by the terrible Wanika.”³⁷ In Hamad bin Said’s estimation, although the Mazrui governors occupied Fort Jesus, communities on the mainland held the town’s fate in their hands. He had never traveled to the city, but small communities living in the mainland certainly shaped the political world that he imagined and aspired to control.

The Omani sultan had good reason to fear Mombasa’s “terrible Wanika.” As in prior eras, Mijikenda speakers functioned as the Mazrui’s soldiers and supporters in Mombasa and beyond, with cloth and *heshima* forming the backbone of their partnerships. During the eighteenth century, Mombasa’s sphere of influence included most of the coast of modern Kenya, stretching from Ras Ngomeni (to the north of Malindi) to Pangani (in present-day northeastern Tanzania) and at times including parts of the Lamu Archipelago in northern Kenya.³⁸ The Mazrui also controlled the key provisioning point of Pemba Island, which provided relief against intermittent droughts. In Muscat, Busaidi leaders were clearly aware of the critical role that Mijikenda speakers had played on the East African coast for centuries. Hamad bin Said never achieved his goal of controlling Mombasa. However, Muscat’s growing political and commercial strength by the start of the nineteenth century put his successors in a position to finally make a play for the town.

During the early nineteenth century, the Omani dynasty slowly began exerting influence on towns along the northern Swahili coast. In 1813, representatives from Lamu invited Oman to help protect the town after they defeated a joint alliance of Mombasa and Pate, driving the Mazrui-appointed governors from the Lamu Archipelago.³⁹ From that point, the Busaidi began encroaching on Mombasa’s larger sphere of influence in a series of small wars and conflicts that lasted more than two decades. In 1823, the Busaidi took control of Pemba after defeating the famed military leader Mbaruk Mazrui and a contingent of Mijikenda soldiers serving him on the island.⁴⁰ Losing Pemba was a turning point. Soon after, the Mazrui looked to the British navy for assistance, hoping that a protectorate at Mombasa would prevent Busaidi aggression against the town.

The informal protectorate was short lived, however. At the end of July 1826, the British navy left Mombasa following a pressure campaign by allies of Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi (the sultan of Oman, honorifically Seyyid Said), which persuaded British governors in India to not extend formal protection over the town. Within eighteen months, the Busaidi initiated the first of three major campaigns in Mombasa. And in 1837, they finally pushed the Mazrui out of the city after imposing an economic blockade on the port, straining the local alliances that formed the basis of Mazrui governance.⁴¹

The rivalry between the Busaidi and Mazrui dynasties illuminates the shifting tides of commerce and politics in the western Indian Ocean during the nineteenth century. The Mazrui invested heavily in local relationships. Their goal, as historian Fahad Bishara has argued, was to maintain their place “as rulers of independent

port cities” like Mombasa. The Busaidi, by contrast, endeavored to monopolize commerce in East Africa and southern Arabia by controlling the most significant ports in both regions.⁴² Thus, the confrontations between the Mazrui and Busaidi in Mombasa represented a turning point in the coast’s history whereby a network of loosely linked towns, which thrived by maintaining strong ties with their interiors, were subsumed into an oceanic empire. All of Mombasa’s constituencies, including their Mijikenda-speaking allies, were folded into a commercial empire with new goals, technologies, and foci. The Busaidi Sultanate’s rise altered the direction of commerce in East Africa, introducing new financial arrangements based on credit and foreign capital.⁴³ On a local level, these changes altered the nature of Mombasa’s relationship with its mainland. Mijikenda speakers slowly lost their ability to influence the town’s trading relationships and politics using established strategies like *heshima*.

While norms of honor and reciprocity had structured town-interior relationships in the past, Mijikenda-speaking communities became marginalized in Mombasa’s politics under Busaidi rule. For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine how Mijikenda communities understood these changes. In some ways, the Busaidi’s ascension represented a profound departure from the earlier forms of interaction between town and interior that stretched back centuries. Under Busaidi rule, Zanzibar became East Africa’s main commercial capital while the adjacent Mrima coast emerged as its primary supply land.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the capitalization of commerce transformed trading networks in East Africa’s interior. Large-scale caravans financed with lines of foreign credit replaced older trade parties like *charo*. For many Mijikenda speakers, integration into world markets manifested as a slow erosion of established norms of honor and reciprocity. They articulated these changes as a betrayal of *heshima*.

SLAVERY AND THE SHIFTING BALANCE BETWEEN HONOR AND DEBT IN BUSAIDI MOMBASA

When the Busaidi dynasty took control of Mombasa in 1837, the larger region was experiencing a famine that was especially harsh for communities on the mainland. Famines, or *ndzala* in Mijikenda, were not atypical in the region. Although Mijikenda speakers produced and traded in food goods, they also faced intermittent food insecurity.⁴⁵ Food shortages could force people to relocate to new areas, where they adopted junior roles as dependent outsiders in exchange for food and refuge. During the worst *ndzala*, inland homestead heads pawned junior dependents in Mombasa in exchange for food.⁴⁶ These pawning arrangements followed preestablished norms. After each *ndzala*, homestead heads would travel to Mombasa to reclaim their pawns. Inland homestead heads had long practiced such exchanges with the Mazrui governors. However, at the end of the famine of 1836–1837, Mombasa had a new government. When inland homestead heads traveled to Mombasa

at the end of this *ndzala*, they found that the town's new authorities had sent some of the pawns to Arabia as slaves.⁴⁷

This section takes the famine and the subsequent rise of the Busaidi in Mombasa as entry points to explore changes in ideas about honor (*heshima*) and debt (*kore*) from the 1830s to 1850s. Stories about Arab traders kidnapping Mijikenda children during famines are common tropes in oral traditions. In the 1970s, Mijikenda elders told Spear many stories about late nineteenth-century famines, during which people were lured onto dhows by the promise of food but were instead abducted and taken away into slavery.⁴⁸ When Krapf reached Mombasa in the 1840s, he heard similar stories, including ones about the “great famine” of 1836–1837. Prior to this famine, Mijikenda trading parties made near-daily visits to Mombasa.⁴⁹ However, after 1837, some inland communities viewed Mombasa with “aversion and dread,” according to Krapf. Instead, Mijikenda traders began redirecting their commercial activities to trade centers at Mtsanganyiko and Takaungu, where the Mazrui relocated after the Busaidi drove them out of Mombasa.⁵⁰

To be clear, I do not know whether the famine of 1836–1837 was the cataclysmic moment Krapf claimed, or whether some pawns being permanently enslaved was entirely unprecedented. Instead, I am interested in the ways these stories about pawns and social debts, honor, and betrayal resonated with documented changes from this same historical moment. The famine overlapped with the exponential growth of coastal East Africa's plantation economy, meaning enslaved people, run-aways, and other vulnerable people were increasingly numerous in and around Mombasa. The Busaidi government continued practices of *heshima*, but they also cut into Mijikenda speakers' control over inland trade goods. Entangled stories of *heshima* and *kore*, thus, direct us to local understandings of the Mombasa region's incorporation into the Busaidi's oceanic empire, and Mijikenda speakers' changing influence in the region.

The ideas about honor and debt articulated in the famine of 1836–1837 were closely linked to the practice of pawning junior dependents. Pawning—or the “transfer of ‘rights in persons’”—was a widespread and ancient practice in the Mombasa region. Homestead heads held rights over the junior members of their extended family. They could exchange their dependents' rights to settle debts, to obtain provisions during famines, and to pay compensation for crimes.⁵¹ Speakers of Mijikenda languages called these exchanges *kore*, a term derived from the proto-Bantu word *-kódè, which meant “captive.” Ancient speech communities in equatorial Africa created this word from the verb *-kód-, meaning “touch, seize.” Marcos de Almeida has shown that “by adding the final *-e, speakers shifted the perspective from the process to the result of the action of touching or seizing.” Based on this derivation and analysis of comparative lexical materials, de Almeida argues that *-kódè represented a “captive seized for settling debts and offenses between local groups.”⁵² The meaning “captive” has remained relatively stable on

the East African coast over time based on the word's distribution in other Sabaki and Northeast Coast languages.⁵³

Like their distant linguistic ancestors, Mijikenda speakers situated *kore* within the interpersonal realm. They used the word for things like transferring a junior family member to another lineage as "compensation" or "blood money," often as part of the apparatus of judicial oaths (*virapho*) described in chapter 2.⁵⁴ People also sometimes exchanged *kore* across sociolinguistic communities. Such was the case in pawning during famines or as compensation for a crime or unpaid debts.⁵⁵ But ultimately, *kore* operated less as a category of person violently seized or captured than as a person transferred according to established social codes and judicial procedures.

A brief turn to linguistic evidence allows us to contrast *kore* to other relationships of dependency in Mijikenda languages, illustrating how people viewed practices like pawning during food shortages. Notably, many of the common terms that describe forms of slavery in Mijikenda are loanwords from Swahili. For instance, Mijikenda speakers borrowed words meaning "runaway slave" (*mtoro*), "captives" (*mateka*), and "slave" (*mtumwa*).⁵⁶ These borrowed words offer evidence of expanding forms of inequality in the Mombasa region and allow us to parse the differences between *kore* and the other meanings introduced into Mijikenda languages during more recent historical periods. For instance, both *mateka* and *kore* described temporary states of bondage, such as being a "captive," but with marked differences. *Mateka*, which was derived from a verb meaning "to plunder," was applied to war captives or hostages, encompassing a form of marginality that was both violent and lacking in personal connections.⁵⁷ *Kore*, by contrast, existed between people with established relationships. Furthermore, it was contractual in nature, as is evident in its usage for settling debts or providing compensation.⁵⁸ Even though those transferring their junior dependents as *kore* ultimately had no control over those people's fates, in most instances there remained the possibility of reobtaining their rights later.

The linguistic picture reflects the minimal nature of slave raiding in Mombasa's interior prior to the nineteenth century. While early Swahili towns supplied enslaved captives for other parts of the Indian Ocean, most enslaved people were used locally as unequally incorporated dependents. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hadhrami merchants living in the Lamu Archipelago started shipping captives from Madagascar to the Comoros Islands and ports in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. In towns like Mombasa and Zanzibar, the Portuguese forced enslaved people to work in their forts and as soldiers. But imperial merchants in Portuguese ports generally did not trade slaves to other parts of the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹ Historical records indicate that Mijikenda speakers did sometimes sell captives from the interior in Mombasa and capture runaways on behalf of their partners in the town.⁶⁰ More often, however, European accounts

speak to Mombasa as a place with great potential for the slave trade but minimal actual trade in enslaved captives. In 1773, a French official lamented that Mombasa could “furnish up to six thousand slaves” annually but that the town’s merchants preferred to limit their trade with Europeans to ivory, copal, and ambergris.⁶¹ Instead, the Mazrui exploited enslaved people’s labor for local public works projects and their militaries while also keeping some enslaved women as concubines.⁶²

The role of slavery in East African society changed dramatically by the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, coastal patricians started investing in large-scale plantations where they grew crops like cloves, coconuts, and sugar.⁶³ The growing global demands for these cash crops created new markets for enslaved laborers, most of whom were captured in the interior of eastern and southern Africa and violently transported to coastal plantations.⁶⁴ While Mijikenda speakers were generally not forced into labor on coastal plantations, the “servile labour force” in nineteenth-century coastal East Africa was far more varied than just plantation slavery. Clients, debtors, and younger members of homesteads were increasingly vulnerable to being enslaved.⁶⁵ As a result, *kore* shifted from an occasional practice rooted in ideas about obligation and proper procedure to a more permanent form of “debt imprisonment.”

Up until the mid-1800s, merchants from Mombasa had occasionally used debt imprisonment as a safeguard for their trade relationships with rural partners. According to Krapf, people seized *kore* “on account of the debt of another countryman or of a relation who owes the taker some money, but has not yet paid him.” Once the debt was repaid, the *kore* was then returned to their family member.⁶⁶ Although debt imprisonment was, by Krapf’s reckoning, “the only power and means which the government of Mombas[a] possesse[d] to help their subjects to the recovery of their money,” it rarely utilized it in practice. By occasionally seizing *kore*, Mombasa’s merchants could provide a “check” against unfair terms from their inland partners. However, in the long run, these practices would not “satisfactorily secure the position of the merchants.”⁶⁷ As Methodist missionary Charles New similarly expressed, “Even the short-sighted slave-owner of the coast sees that the freedom of the Wanika [Mijikenda], is far more advantageous to him than it would be to capture and enslave them.” As New saw it, Mijikenda communities were more valuable as allies than as captives for coastal merchants since they provided trade goods and assistance in warfare.⁶⁸

The missionaries’ observations reflect the ways that *heshima* and *kore* were mutually constitutive practices. The ideology of *heshima* provided a way for Mijikenda communities to hold the government in Mombasa accountable for its actions. *Kore*, meanwhile, enabled Mombasa’s merchant class to assure fair terms in trade with inland communities by occasionally claiming debt captives as bargaining chips. This interplay continued after the Busaidi took control of Mombasa, as is evidenced in the writings of Krapf and New, both of whom arrived in the region

only after the Mazrui's overthrow. At the same time, their writings suggest that the practice of debt imprisonment was becoming increasingly common. By the 1840s, if a person owed a debt, creditors in Mombasa would seize the first person they met from the interior and imprison them "until the relatives of the prisoner's tribe pay off the debt, or until they can induce the original debtor, to settle his affairs at Mombas[a]." ⁶⁹ While earlier practices of *kore* were based around preexisting relationships between debtors and creditors, the later forms of debt imprisonment and pawning lacked these intimacies. ⁷⁰ This shift from pawning to debt imprisonment was a departure from the established notions of accountability and honor that had long undergirded town-inland relationships.

It is important to remember that commentaries like Krapf's are filtered through the eyes of missionaries, who, in many cases, flattened the diverse range of dependent relationships described above into "slavery." Justin Willis points out that "what Krapf saw as a transformation wrought by the Busaidi was a possibility always present in this type of relationship, the terms of which may well have varied from one individual to the next." ⁷¹ Moreover, inland homestead heads had a vested interest in portraying Mombasa as a dangerous place. Such portrayals helped them thwart the free movement of people from rural communities into the city. By limiting contact with Mombasa, wealthy men could maintain their hold on economic partnerships with their counterparts in town. Younger women and men sometimes subverted these controls by fleeing from their homesteads to join new patronage networks in Mombasa. In doing so, they could avoid potential vulnerabilities that arose during famines or due to their family member's or patron's debts. Mobility gave dependent members of inland homesteads—especially younger women—a strategy for controlling their own labor. Thus, the relational crises that observers like Krapf described as "slavery" were also connected to larger gendered and generational disputes. ⁷²

Ultimately, anecdotes about debt imprisonment and changes in *kore* draw attention to continuing insecurities and internal challenges for Mijikenda communities that were amplified by political and economic changes in Mombasa during the 1830s and after. Tracing Mombasa's history through the concepts of *kore* and *heshima* contextualizes memories of the "great famine" of 1836–1837. It helps us to see the famine not as a single cataclysmic event but as a moment that marked the start of the erosion of older practices bound by interlinked ideas about mutual debt and honor. The Busaidi governors continued to offer their inland neighbors *heshima*, at least intermittently, after the famine. I am less concerned with whether these practices were becoming less prominent than with the ways that ideas about honor and mutual respect were embedded in local understandings of East Africa's shifting political and commercial terrain, as is evident in oral traditions, missionaries' accounts, and the Mazrui's own chronicles. ⁷³ By the mid-nineteenth century, Mombasa was becoming less of a port city set in the land of the Mijikenda.

Yet Mijikenda speakers' understandings of their autonomy from the town persisted, even amid these transformations.

THE LIMITS OF OMANI AUTHORITY IN MOMBASA'S INTERIOR

In March 1853, Seyyid Said, the sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, traveled to Mombasa to meet with the leaders of several Mijikenda constituencies. This meeting followed a surge of French interest in East Africa, including rumors that the French backed a regime change on Zanzibar.⁷⁴ For Seyyid Said, it provided an opportunity to assess and affirm his support in Mombasa and the surrounding region. Krapf also attended this meeting and provided a report on the gathering for Henry Venn, the secretary of the Church Missionary Society. According to Krapf's report, Seyyid Said

assembled all the chiefs of all the Wanika [Mijikenda] tribes, & asked them in earnest whether they were his subjects or whether they were independent of him. They all declared boisterously that he was their father, their king, that their country and everything belonged to him.⁷⁵

Krapf was perplexed by this declaration. By proclaiming their allegiance to Seyyid Said, the Mijikenda representatives submitted their land and liberty to Oman and Zanzibar. They were, he claimed, "unaware of the consequences" as "the whole Kinika [Mijikenda] land belongs from that day to the Imam of Muscat."⁷⁶ While Krapf found this show of allegiance perplexing he also questioned whether this pledge had any actual implications, noting that "the Imam has demanded no tribute from them, so that everything remained in the former state." Instead, Seyyid Said was "content with the nominal allegiance."⁷⁷ Johannes Rebmann, Krapf's missionary partner at Rabai, also attended the meeting, and his account reflected similar sentiments. The inland leaders gave their allegiance to Seyyid Said, he explained, "without any show of resistance well knowing that their independence would remain just the same which it was before, as long as no tribute was demanded from them."⁷⁸

The two missionaries' descriptions of this meeting offer a good illustration of how communities adjacent to Mombasa viewed their relationship to the town. In the meeting, the Omani sultan asked those assembled to acknowledge that they were his dependent subjects. The attendees were aware, however, that without any stipulations or exchanges—of either material goods like cloth or of *heshima*—the agreement was an empty gesture. Simply put, they did not see themselves as dependents of Seyyid Said or of any party in Mombasa since they were not required to offer any tributes. The inverse was also true: for centuries, Mombasa's political and merchant classes, both foreign and local, had sent regular tributes to Mijikenda-speaking communities. By offering this *heshima*, Swahili, Arabs, and Europeans

assumed an intentionally deferential positioning from the perspectives of their inland partners.

The major transformations unfolding across East Africa's coast and interior during the nineteenth century are well documented in the literature. The development of the plantation economy on Zanzibar, Pemba, and mainland East Africa created a demand for captives from the interior of eastern and central Africa to work as forced laborers on the coast.⁷⁹ Some inland societies, like the Yao and Nyamwezi, capitalized on the changing commercial landscape by supplying ivory and enslaved captives for global markets. Through this "nexus of international trade" the interior of eastern and central Africa became integrated into the capitalist world system.⁸⁰ African consumers were not passive recipients in the face of these changes. Societies in East Africa's interior influenced global production and exchange by demanding and domesticating imported commodities to fit their own goals and needs.⁸¹ In coastal towns like Pangani and Bagamoyo, the influx of people from the interior during the second half of the nineteenth century begat a remaking of urban citizenship.⁸² Coastal traders did employ some Mijikenda speakers as caravan porters, and they continued to obtain goods like copal, copra, and foodstuffs from communities on the mainland.⁸³ But the Busaidi increasingly directed the focus of the long-distance caravan trade to towns along the Mrima coast, where economic "relationships were less concentrated on the local hinterland."⁸⁴

Mijikenda-speaking communities felt the changes that followed the establishment of Busaidi authority differently than such well-known narratives of social and economic transformation depict. While ideas about generosity and obligation bound patrons and clients *within* coastal centers like Pangani, in Mombasa the politics of obligation extended far beyond the town itself. For centuries, reciprocity had formed the basis of relationships between Mombasa and its neighbors. Tributes undergirded trade partnerships and political and military alliances. The regular transfer of cloth textiles from the town to inland villages not only constituted a symbol of respect but also marked the continued autonomy of the gifts' recipients.

Even in the early years of Busaidi rule, Mijikenda communities held "rights of retaliation" against the Omani government, enabling them to retain control over their territory. As Krapf explained in 1844, although Seyyid Said claimed the region inland from Mombasa as his jurisdiction, they were "not dependent on the Imam." They, he continued, "are on good terms with him and the people of Mombas[a], as he gives them presents from time to time." However, Mijikenda communities maintained their independence from the government on Zanzibar by refusing to participate in transactions with coastal traders, in case "any wrong is committed" against them. In some instances, inland communities would go so far as entirely "closing their chief market places to the Mombassians."⁸⁵ By wielding these "rights of retaliation," Mijikenda groups retained a "collective strategy"

for ensuring that the Busaidi government respected them and did not violate the expectations of *heshima* and *kore*.⁸⁶

Although *heshima* exchanges continued under Mombasa's new government, inland communities were much more ambivalent toward these partnerships. Contrasting attitudes toward the Mazrui and Busaidi, a French merchant who visited Mombasa in the 1840s wrote that Mijikenda leaders "only took account of orders given to them" by the Busaidi governor "if that was convenient for them." Following centuries of practice, "they never answered his call without having first received the customary piece of fabric."⁸⁷ Mijikenda-speaking communities had long counted on tributes to assert their autonomy from Mombasa. But the shift from Mazrui to Busaidi governance gradually eroded well-established reciprocal relationships and redirected control over inland trade networks into new hands. In part, this was the result of the economic focus of the sultanate. On Zanzibar, the Busaidi operated as a loosely organized trading empire with economic activities centered on long-distance caravans and coastal clove plantations worked by enslaved laborers. As a result, by the mid-nineteenth century, Mijikenda traders were increasingly marginalized within the very trade networks that they had helped to develop in the centuries prior.

The Busaidi's growing influence in East Africa did not overhaul connections between Mombasa and its adjacent mainland all at once. Seyyid Said's meeting with inland leaders in 1853 illuminates the unresolved nature of Oman's authority. Although the inland representatives declared that they were the dependent subjects of Seyyid Said and his government, he did not require that they offer any tributes or *heshima*. In many ways, the discordant perceptions of this agreement operate as a metaphor for Busaidi authority in the wider Mombasa region. The rise of Oman's East African empire helped spur the region's integration into emergent global markets. Inland from Mombasa, however, this integration existed alongside the slow erosion of older ideals and past practices.

. . .

In the mid-nineteenth century, East Africa's interior rapidly incorporated into the global economy. Paradoxically, the practices that had long undergirded Mijikenda speakers' participation within the Indian Ocean world were losing their strength. In concluding with this transformative moment in coastal East Africa's past, I do not wish to suggest that the rise of Zanzibar and the Omani empire destroyed Mijikenda speakers' connections to the Indian Ocean altogether. Rather, I want to highlight the ways that this period marked a major shift in their relationships with Mombasa, whereby shared practices with other oceanic societies became increasingly important. By the mid-nineteenth century, participation in coastal commerce increasingly required that people claim membership in urban Islamic society, as Jonathon Glassman has shown.⁸⁸ Like others living around nineteenth-century coastal towns, many members of Mijikenda communities pursued opportunities

to participate in coastal commerce. Doing so meant discarding some practices that had long been central to their participation in oceanic trade and politics by embracing new religious identities, settlement patterns, and social relationships.

One example of Mijikenda speakers' changing relationship with coastal society was the growing number of Mijikenda Muslims during the second half of the nineteenth century. There is no concrete evidence of Islam being practiced within Mijikenda-speaking communities prior to the nineteenth century, despite their proximity to Mombasa and frequent interactions with Muslims. Some Mijikenda speakers had become Muslims at different points in the past, for sure. In these cases, however, they left their home communities and began new lives in Mombasa and other towns along the coast.⁸⁹ This began to change by the 1840s and 1850s, when some Digo-speaking elders living around Mtongwe—a settlement immediately across Kilindini Harbor, to Mombasa's southwest—converted to Islam. Over the next few decades, Digo speakers adopted Islam widely through interactions with Muslim traders from the coast. By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly all the communities to the south of Mombasa had some Muslim converts living in them. Islam was less popular among communities to Mombasa's north and west. Over a similar time frame, however, some Mijikenda converts formed new communities, in most cases moving away from their natal homes and founding settlements near coastal towns or around trading centers that clustered around overland caravan routes.⁹⁰ For the first time in Mombasa's history, Islam began to support relationships between members of inland communities and merchants from the coast.

Prior to the 1830s and 1840s, Mijikenda communities closely guarded interior trade routes, and coastal merchants seldom ventured far beyond Mombasa. To access trade goods and provisions from the interior, they relied on established support networks, undergirded by *heshima*. This changed later in the nineteenth century as inland trading centers became the main focal points for interior trade. While wealthy homestead heads had long overseen trading relationships with the coast, the growth of trading centers like Mtsangnyiko and Takaungu gave younger men opportunities to carve out their own spheres of influence by provisioning the Arab, Swahili, and European caravans that had begun traversing the interior.⁹¹ Mijikenda speakers' ongoing participation in maritime trading networks now necessitated adopting a new religious identity, relocating to locales frequented by coastal traders, or supporting coastal caravans as porters. While Mombasa was once seen as a port city set in the land of the Mijikenda, by the mid-nineteenth century, the town's interior was increasingly incorporated into a different interactive sphere: the Busaidi's oceanic empire.